

THE WALK
A Simple Way to Develop a Pup
By
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Suddenly she stopped and playfully flung herself upside down on the ground. She began joyfully rolling from side to side. I ignored her and continued walking. Before long she was upright and running hard to catch up. Soon she was in front of me until something else demanded her attention. This time she dove into a patch of briars flushing a dicky bird which she chased a short distance. Again, she ran to get in front of me but this time she carried a pine cone in her mouth. I continued to walk and ignore her. I made a left turn up a steep bank and gave a soft “hey”. I watched her turn to look at me and then race up the bank to get in front of me.

Sally is a four-month-old Brittany pup that I am developing. Her instinct to be in front is because a pointing dog is bred to hunt for game in front of the hunter. This instinct is one of many instincts I am developing during the Walk. Even though Sally looks like a cute little white and orange bundle of energy, inside she is an impressive accumulation of pointing dog instincts that she inherited from her ancestors. The better her ancestors, the more instinctive behaviors she inherits which is why it's so important to make sure a pointing dog pup is well-bred. I always look for a pup with parents and grandparents that have been proven in the field. Sally is already showing me she has the right instincts.

Every pup that comes to me is developed the same way – by walking them. While I *train a dog*, it's important to understand I *develop a pup*. A good way to explain what I mean by the term “develop” is with a quick anecdote. When I was five years old my father, a competitive swimmer, threw me off a dock into the bay. I thought I was going to drown but then my arms and legs started moving and before long I began to tread water. At that age I still had enough instincts to stay afloat but if I had been ten years old I might have quickly sunk to the bottom! Puppies are born with many pointing dog instincts but they will lose some of them if not developed while young. The Walk is a great opportunity to expose Sally to a myriad of things

that will help her develop these instincts such as how to use the wind to hunt, how to use her nose to find birds, how close she can get to birds without causing them to fly and how to point. The more opportunities Sally has when she is young, the less things she will need to be taught when she is older.

The Walk is a specific exercise that begins by setting a pace. I do not adjust my pace to Sally by slowing down or stopping. I want Sally to learn it is her job to pay attention to me, not my job to pay attention to her so I help her as little as possible. Sometimes she may get distracted and sometimes lose sight of me. This is fine. I want her to get a little worried about where I am. At one point on the Walk we were taking, Sally got distracted chasing another dicky bird and couldn't find me. She was running around and becoming a bit frantic. I calmly moved closer to where she could see me and gave a soft "hey". She looked up, and as she saw me, I turned and quietly continued in the direction I had been heading and continued to ignore her. It's okay for her to get worried about where I am. She will learn to pay better attention to me in the future.

I like to expose pups to quail on the Walk. Sally is no exception. In preparation to working Sally on loose quail, I take her to the training field and tease her with a clipped-wing quail that has had just enough primary feathers pulled so it can try to escape but not fly off. Then I toss it in the air for her to chase down and catch. It doesn't matter what Sally does with the quail, I stay quiet and leave it between Sally and the quail. By getting the quail in her mouth she is learning she has power over the bird. Some pups may be afraid of birds but once they get them in their mouths, their prey drive is triggered. Each pup is different and some pups need more exposures to clipped-wing quail than other pups but it won't be long before I start seeing a bolder more confident pup on the ground.

After initial exposure to clipped-wing quail, I introduce quail that fly for Sally to hunt on the Walk. The best quail to work pups on are bobwhite quail in a Johnny house (for more information, search Johnny house on the internet). These quail live in the Johnny house where they have feed, water and protection from predators. The house includes a recall funnel, a shelf along the top and a fly-out door. Quail are put in the house, the number depending on the size of the house. When I want to work a pup, I fly out some quail, work a pup on them and leave. The

quail in the house call the released quail back inside through the recall funnel. The advantages to using Johnny house quail are they can be reused plus there are no foot tracks to them or hand scent on them. Pups have to hunt them just like they have to hunt wild quail. If you aren't setup to build a Johnny house, the next best way to put them out is to buy a box of quail, go to an area with cover that will hold birds, open the box and let them fly out. Then bring in your pup and let her hunt them. I do not recommend using quail in launchers for pups. Pups need to learn how to hunt quail that are moving around. Another option is to gently toss a couple of quail into thin cover and wait about 30 minutes before returning with your pup.

The two basic commands for pointing dogs are Here and Whoa. I like to introduce the Here command during the Walk when pups are about Sally's age. Here can mean two things - *go with me* and *come to me*. I always carry treats on the Walk and call a pup to me a couple of times and give her a treat. As the pup gets older, I'll carry a bird bag and fly out a pigeon. I want the pup to associate something good happening every time she successfully comes to me. I wait to teach the Whoa command until formal training begins. Formal training is when a dog is taught to be steady-to-wing-and-shot. A dog should be old enough to handle the pressures of formal training which is usually between one and two years old depending on the breed and how quickly they mature. For a more in depth discussion, please see the book Training with Mo by Martha Greenlee (Valencia, PA: Glade Run Press, 2010).

I continue to walk Sally on foot until she stops coming to me. This age is usually around six or seven months old. Sally's brain will go through the natural maturing process of becoming more independent - think teenager. Sally still wants to go with me but she no longer wants to come to me. Each pup is different but I stop running a pup when she won't come to me and becomes hard to pick up. I don't want her to learn she can ignore me so when Sally starts ignoring me, the Walks stop. We return to the training field where I introduce the e-collar on a checkcord. Once I am confident Sally understands the e-collar and I can use it to reinforce the Here command, we return to the Walks. Around the same time, I introduce Sally to gunfire. Sally is ready for gunfire when she is bold and totally focused on finding birds. Once again the Walks stop and we return to the training field.

Each pup has a comfort zone – the distance a pup is comfortable away from me. Some pups are comfortable hunting close to me and rarely range more than 40 or 50 yards away. Some pups head for the horizon and don't look back. It depends on the pup and what she inherited from her parents. If I want a closer working pup, I look for a pup from closer working parents. While I can shorten the range a pup hunts at, I will always be fighting the pup's genetics.

As the Walks continue, Sally has become more mature. Not quite a year old, she is bolder and soars over small patches of briars and tall grasses in the fields. In the woods, she leaps over fallen logs like a horse riding to hounds. She holds point longer, waits for me to get to her and sometimes lets me take a few steps in front of her before diving in to flush. I notice she is chasing birds less because she has learned she can't catch them. As I watch Sally I know it won't be long before she is ready for formal training. Up until now everything we've done on the Walk, with the exceptions of introducing the e-collar and gunfire, have been geared to developing her instinctive behaviors. For the most part, I have remained silent and ignored her while at the same time she has learned her job is to hunt in front of me. All the fun she has had has been with me and I feel we have built a connection between us. We have become a team.

Once formal training begins, Sally will be taught to be steady-to-wing-and-shot. She will learn her job is to find the bird, but once she finds the bird, the bird will no longer belong to her. It will belong to me. Whether the bird is shot or allowed to fly away, she will learn she has to remain standing and accept the fact that the bird is no longer hers. This reality will go against her fundamental instinct to survive. The Walks that Sally and I have taken for the last year have been aimed at developing Sally for formal training and I'm confident Sally is going to be an "A" student once formal training begins!

She raced up the steep bank and began crisscrossing the long field. She was headed toward a Johnny house where I had flown out quail earlier in the day. A thick area of broom sedge demanded her attention. Her tail began to whip back and forth, faster and faster. Bam, she froze! And then in an instant she dove in, chasing a small covey of quail into the woods. She was fired up now, pointing and chasing as many quail as she could find until her tongue dangled from her open mouth. Not wanting her to get overheated, I started to head back the way we had come and

gave a soft “hey”. She looked up, saw me and ran to catch up. Leading the way, she raced back down the bank, turned right and scrambled down another bank. I knew where she was going and picked up my pace just in time to watch her disappear into a gully. The gully was made by a small stream. Sounds of splashing water and then I saw her. She was laying down with her belly submerged in the cold water. I sat down on a log. Slowly she lapped water barely flowing over moss-covered rocks. Time passed. Eventually she became aware of my presence and looked up. Our eyes met and her expression said it all: isn’t life great!